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ABSTRACT

Storytelling has existed as a style of leadership in many cultures for countless generations. Storytelling organizes complex patterns of ideas into functional processing models. Stories often by analogy actively restructure the listener's approaches to the issues involved. In this context, a successful story contains all of the essential elements of a listener's concerns and then organizes these elements into a viable and replicable process. Storytelling can generate abstract outlines and relational networks for ideas that also serve as guides for actions and understanding. A successful story may begin a process that leads to a conclusion and growth far beyond the original tale because the storyteller provides a vehicle for the listeners to manipulate in their own way and derive and elaborate their own solutions. The five components of effective storytelling for leadership are: (1) identify the discordant, limited, or conflicted elements of the listeners' schema; (2) develop a story in which the conflicted elements are reorganized into one or more workable systems; (3) present the story as a propositional schema; (4) lead the listener in exploring the propositional schema by discussing elements of the story; and (5) through discussion, lead the listener back to her or his issues and guide the transfer of the client's schematic elements into the newly defined functional schema. (MAB)

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INFERENTIAL LEADERSHIP:

LESSONS FROM NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLING

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ACADEMY

Dr. Eric J. Jolly is senior scientist at the Education Development Center, a not-for-profit, research and development "think-tank" which operates projects in more than 20 countries including 500 schools within the United States. He is a member of numerous honor societies including Sigma Xi, Phi Eta Sigma, Mortar Board, and Golden Key, and is also a Kellogg National Leadership Fellow. Dr. Jolly is the former Assistant to the Chancellor at the University of Nebraska and has served in a leadership capacity at universities around the country including posts of department chair, acting dean for education, and associate dean of arts and sciences. He is fluent in several languages including sign languages.

An active scholar, Dr. Jolly has been associated with the Buro's Institute, the Radcliffe School of Public Policy, and the Center For Research On Minority Education. He has published many scholarly articles and book chapters and lectured throughout the world. He was among the first Americans to train psychologists of the Eastern Block countries in substance abuse and cultural treatment strategies, including a series of presentations for the Vygotsky Institute. His most recent book is titled "Settling In," a guide for new university students.

Eric Jolly is nationally recognized for his work in the Native American community. A traditional storyteller and fiberartist, Eric's work has been exhibited throughout the nation and his pieces are part of several important private and public collections including: the Swope Museum and Gallery, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Quisenberry Collection. Through the Rhode Island and Nebraska (Lincoln) Indian Councils, Eric has brought leadership to issues and programs representing more than 4000 indigenous people from over 50 Indian Nations. He was recently honored as key note speaker to the 25th National Indian Education Association.

Dr. Jolly has continued to bring his interest in social problems to bear on issues outside the traditional university setting. He has founded the nation's largest college SADD program; authored a widely read newspaper column on substance abuse; hosted a National Radio Call-In Program; founded and directs the National Institute for Affirmative Action and serves on numerous national and community advisory boards. His current projects include service to the International Board of the Christian Children's Fund, the national centers of Girls Incorporated (formerly Girls Clubs of America), and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (COOS). He is a consultant to the National Science Foundation's "Collaboration for Equity" project and a coordinator for the National Center for Fairness and Social Change.

Inferential Leadership: Lessons from Native American Storytelling

by Eric J. Jolly

The young man's heart was full of pain as he sat there sad, lonely, and afraid. He feared telling his wife of his pain. Each time he tried, they would only fight and the pain and fear would increase. His grandmother, still and intent, listened to this tale through the young man's weary voice. "I tell her how she makes me angry and fearful," he said, "and then she accuses me of accuses me of accusing her. She doesn't hear me, doesn't know what I mean, then she becomes more forceful and we fight again." The young man shook his head, his eyes downcast. "There is no other way for a man but to swallow his pain and ignore his fears."

The grandmother remained still. Then she raised herself up in the chair. Her eyes seemed to grow darker as she focused on the young man who was sitting low before her. He knew that she was about to tell a story.

This odd ritual, so full of animation, expression, and art, was a serious thing. A story to be witnessed as convincingly as any truth shared between them. And so the grandmother's voice quickened as she began to tell the story of the snakes and the horses...

You see, the snakes were constantly being trampled upon by horses and other large-hoofed animals. One day, the snakes complained to the horses. They said, "You make us frightened--you are large and hurtful creatures." The horses heard this and were deeply grieved for they believed that the snakes thought them to be faulted in the way they were made by God. They could not help being large and hoofed. The horses decided that there was nothing they could do about this, and so they pridefully stood up for their hooves and trampled even more upon the snakes.

Then the otter (a friend of snakes because of his small size and soft, p[illegible]ided feet) explained to the snakes that the fear and pain belonged only to them. They could not blame the horses for their own fear. Horses are not fear and pain. Horses' presence and behavior is a signal for the fear that is in the snakes.

The otter suggested that the snakes tell the truth and admit their fears. And they did. Upon hearing that there was nothing wrong with them for being large and hoofed, the horses were no longer defensive. They decided to help the fearful snakes by raising their front feet and moving away whenever they see a snake.

By this time, the grandmother's eyebrows were raised as if she herself were surprised by the simple and honest solution to this tale. Then the animation of the story began to fade, and she lay back in her chair.

The young man knew that he could now ask questions and explore the tale if need be--but for him the answers were already clear. He knew how he could talk to his wife about his feelings without accusation. He would face the fears that were his and ask for her help. He would express his vulnerability and not make his wife responsible for these feelings.

My story should stop here, where we could share the pleasure of discussing and elaborating the lessons of this piece. In the words that follow, I will try to fill the conversational void that should be explored with the storyteller and begin to present an idea of storytelling as an alternative style of leadership.

Storytelling, in a specialized format, has existed as a style of leadership in many cultures for unnumbered generations. Storytelling is a tool that organizes complex patterns of ideas into functional processing models. In a schematic sense, stories place important or key elements of the listener's concerns in a structured relational network. These stories may, by analogy, actively restructure the listener's approaches to issues. When the constructs of the listener's concerns are given a new processing model, a new

vision and a new means to relate to existing concerns are created. The process advances unique actions and solutions.

The power for change through a story depends upon its utility as an allegory. A story is useful to the extent that it contains important elements that are highly analogous to the contents of the listener's concerns. A successful story contains all of the essential elements of the listener's problem or the issue, and then organizes these elements into a viable and replicable process. It then must create a pattern that reframes how these elements are understood.

In this context, I am identifying the process of schematic formation as that which is concerned with the reorganizing, defining, or extending of the individual's schema so as to make it more effective for the prediction and control of the person's life events. As a cognitive psychology approach to knowledge formation, schematic process models are concerned with helping the listener develop more elaborate and effective ways to conceptualize, process, respond, and manage the issues which define their dilemmas.

This is essentially what a *storytell* can achieve. In much the same way that schemas serve as organizational frameworks for interconnected structures of information and action-event sequences, *storytells* can generate abstract outlines and relational networks for ideas that also serve as guides for actions and understanding. A *storytell*

can offer the individual a propositional schema that more effectively organizes the problem areas of concern to the individual.

When a story contains enough material to engage listeners, and not so much specificity as to prevent them from introjecting their experiences into the story's framework, it draws the listeners into an active restructuring of their own thoughts. The discussion that follows the telling of a story permits further personalization, specification, and elaboration of these insights.

A successful story may begin a process or open a discussion that leads to a conclusion and growth far beyond the original tale. It does so because it allows people to explore ideas in an indirect and oftentimes less threatening fashion. The story focuses on a specific issue and not on the listener or leader.

The storyteller is providing a vehicle for the listeners. It is a vehicle in which the listeners place their own elements and by which they derive and elaborate their own solutions. In many ways, this leadership style assigns the management of change to the "followers" from the outset.

As detailed above, the creation and use of a *storytell* to assist the listener in schema development for change can be broken down into five component parts. These components are:

1. Identify the discordant, limited, or conflicted elements of the listener's schema. This is a period of data gathering during which the storyteller explores limitations, issues of process, and conflicting units within the schema that is used by the listener in conceptualizing her or his dilemma.

2. Develop a story in which the conflicted elements are reorganized into one or more workable systems (schemas). The story should represent a structural reframing of the issues.

3. Present the story/analogy as a propositional schema. The presentation must not confront directly the listener's dilemma, but should represent analogous elements and activities.

4. Lead the listener in exploring and defining the propositional schema by "what iffing?" aspects of the story. This is a testing phase for refining the propositional schema. Here the listener may even retell parts of the story in order to devise a schema that deals with additional aspects of the dilemma(s) as she or he perceives them. In this phase, the listener is developing a functional schema from the material presented in the propositional schema.

5. Through discussion, lead the listener back to her or his own issues and guide the transfer of the client's schematic elements into the newly defined functional schema.

The leadership style of storytelling is an unusual one in today's world. It does not reflect the fiery, charismatic character who will first inspire loyalty to himself or herself and then to his or her ideas. A story is not itself intended to be inspirational; rather it allows the listener a means to reorganize thoughts and to engage in self-discovery and self-inspiration.

It is this interaction of the audience's and the storyteller's concerns that permits a story to serve as a unique tool of leadership. The storyteller does not need to discount elements of concern in open refutation, nor add his or her own concerns through force or debate. Rather, the storytelling selectively incorporates and places the concerns of the people into an organized pattern so that listeners may be more effective in meeting their own needs. The skilled storyteller is responsive to others, communicates collective needs, creates a new vision, generates a means to action, and gives hope through inspiration. This, albeit unusual, is leadership—one of several nontraditional and imaginative alternatives to the fiery, charismatic model of leadership.

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